

The Fitafta Guard and Samoan Military Experience

Tuala Sevaaetasi

Dr Franco has mentioned most of the things that happened in Samoa during World War II, but I was there. I was in the service, in this outfit he mentioned, called the Fitafta Guard. I believe there are a lot of you who have heard of that name, and maybe have even been in Samoa during that time to see what those people did. But there are some who do not understand what the word *fitafta* means. The word *fitafta* is a Samoan word for "soldier," the people who are ready to fight for their country, who are ready to render their service when their country needs it the most.

I was surprised when World War II came to Samoa. Fitafta is a unit of the regular navy. They received the same salary that regular navy received. Only in those days there was not much money, but the value of the money was there. The private or the seaman drew \$21 a month. So did the Fitafta. In 1900 President McKinley gave the authority to Commander Tilley to establish the navy authority in Samoa. That lasted until 30 June 1951, when by executive order the administration of the island was transferred to the Department of Interior. Franco also said that during that time, those people, the Fitafta Guard, were relocated here in Hawai'i, stationed at Barbers Point. That was the beginning of the big migration from Samoa, because of those people.

Let me speak about what the Fitafta did for their country and for the military. After Commander Tilley first formed the Fitafta Guard in 1900 some people were assigned to sea duty. At that time there was only one navy ship in Samoa. It was not a destroyer, it was not a cruiser, but a tug boat. Some Samoans from the Fitafta Guard were assigned sea duty on that ship.

Now, what did they do for their country? The navy at that time was not too strict about the Fitafta purchasing things from the commissary and PXs, the post exchanges. So in that way most of the Islanders depended on the Fitafta. The Fitafta bought things from the navy commissary. So most of these people depended greatly on the Fitafta Guard. And because these guards are Samoans, the native people of American Samoa respected them. In Samoa during World War II, there were changes everywhere the war came.

TUALA SEVAAETASI

One of the big changes in Samoa was population. Everywhere you went after the war, you saw some *haole* (Caucasian) kids, most of them *haole*. That increased the population of Samoa.

Bob Franco also mentioned the work. I've seen those things. Some of the reports Franco gets from these other Samoans--if they were here, I would tell them--they just didn't know what they were talking about. Some guys said that the Samoans were forced to work. No, it was not that way. I go along with somebody who says that when Samoa heard that the US government was at war with Japan, the call came around and they offered their hands to help.

I was enlisted in the navy through the Fitafta Guard in 1932. One of the reasons I wanted to go there was that I love music. In 1902 the navy sent to Samoa two navy musicians to teach the Fitafta Guard so they could organize a band. That band helped to bring up the name of the Fitafta Guard. So I love music and I thought I'd better join the navy, not only for the pay--the pay was there; the Fitafta Guard was about the best paid job in Samoa at that time--but I went there to be a musician, a better musician.

After I joined I found out that there was no vacancy; all the band positions were filled. So they used me as the governor's orderly. In 1933 I accompanied the governor of American Samoa and the assistant administrator from Western Samoa on a trip to Suva for a visit to the Rockefeller Foundation. When we came back, I had a chance. All this time I wanted to come out, to attend a music school to improve my music knowledge. But during that time the war started in Europe and then the navy stopped the transfer. They told me that I'd better stay in Samoa. So I did until 1948 when I left the Fitafta Guard and band. I was proud to serve in the outfit, not only for the US government, but also for my people.

I came here and reenlisted in the army band at Fort Shafter. What happened? When I came to that band there were nothing but local boys, just Filipino. And then their allocation was filled too. There were only two sergeant first class and five second class, and then I reenlisted in the second class. I had no chance to move out, and then all of a sudden the Korean War broke out. Then I saw the memo from the commanding general, "People who have experience in the infantry, we are going to put up an infantry training center at Schofield." So I thought, this is my chance. This is what I learned from Samoa in the Fitafta Guard and band.

When they started that outfit, I was surprised. We were trained like soldiers. Instead of Commander Tilley to bring the Marines to guard the navy installation, Commander Tilley suggested that it would be better to use the Samoan people for the job. Then he found out that the Samoan people are very trustworthy. They served faithfully, and there was no problem with them. The reason for that is the culture. We people know such things as courtesy

and discipline. A child in Samoa is disciplined from a very young age. Now when I accepted, or was accepted for the training center at Schofield, I was one of the teachers to teach discipline and courtesy. Then I found out that was the most hated subject in the army.

If only the good Lord would make me young again, I would reenlist again to serve in the army.

Appendix: Audience Questions and Answers

TS Tuala Sevaaetasi
JF Jonathan Fifi'i

JC John Charlot

JC One of the things I heard about the army presence or navy presence during the war was that the navy men would disrupt the Samoan ceremonies because they'd be sort of flirting with the girls or trying to get girls away from the ceremony. I was wondering if you'd run across this?

TS I have never heard of anything like that. The people of Samoa during the navy administration served with full heart. We even welcomed them to come. Some of the navy personnel even came and slept in our homes, but nothing happened. I have never heard of one rape case during all the fifty years the navy was in Samoa. The people respect the navy, and their personnel respect the Samoan culture, too. I didn't hear anything about that.

JC I was wondering, were there a number of navy officers who were offered Samoan titles? Was there any mixing of those?

TS Yes, there were some Samoans, even our Senator Inouye. Inouye, when he came to Samoa, the Samoans asked him to be their spokesman in Congress. So Inouye accepted that, even now he has been helping the Samoans. So the Samoans named him the Fofoga o Samoa. In other words, the one who represents Samoa. His word is above all the chiefs' words of Samoa. He speaks for all the chiefs of Samoa. There are other people who came back, and I heard that they were given titles in Samoa.

JF I've got another question, my friend. You've been talking a lot about Samoa, but here we talk about World War II and you didn't touch anything about how World War II affected Samoa, Pago Pago.

TS Well, there were not any encounters during World War II in Samoa, but I heard someone earlier mention propaganda or rumors. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor there were rumors in Samoa that the Japanese said, "Well, we missed you this time, but we'll see you New Years." You know that thing came true. In January 1942 the Japanese shelled American Samoa, Tutuila. This harbor, even though it's small, it's deep enough for big ships, and it's well surrounded by mountains. So it is very hard, there is no place for a plane to land. When the Japanese shelled the place, there were already fortifications put up on the other side of the island by the 7th Marine who first came there to fortify the place. But the trouble was they put up four six-inch guns, two on one side of the mouth of the harbor, and two on the other side, all facing the entrance. And they also mounted the antiaircraft batteries. During the war that was another part of the Fitafta Guard's duty. Like myself, I was assigned to those antiaircraft batteries. My duty, I was one of the gunmen with the Marines, with the 7th Defense. So that was part of the Fitafta Guard's duty.

As I said, nobody knew how in the world Commander Tilley and the old Samoans called this unit, this regular navy unit, the Fitafta, the soldiers. But when they organized that outfit we were trained to be ready for actions like this. I've been in the Fitafta rifle team. Every once in a while the British would come and then ask permission to use the rifle range. We competed with all the teams that passed through Samoa, and none of them could beat us. When they gave me the chance to be an instructor up at Schofield for individual weapons, they asked me, "Have you given any classes before?" I told them, "No." "And what are you going to teach the trainees?" I told them, "You give me any individual weapon and I'll fire against the best you have. And if I can shoot that good, then I know how to teach these people how to shoot." And I've been a competitive shooter for the army all this time, even during my time in the band. I have traveled to Camp Perry, Ohio, where the national competition is held every year. I usually shot rifles, but then age crept in, so I turned to the pistol. My permanent classification is master. I shoot against the best. I am not the best, but so far as training goes, I once started teaching a kid in the band here in Honolulu to shoot the pistol. We started from the arms rule. The pistol is not too accurate; they're not made for competition. But when I left for three years and came back, that boy had won the championship of this island. He was the best. And then from here, the army called him for the army team stationed at Fort Benning. He held the national record for more years than anyone who has won the national record. Those are some of the things we did during World War II.